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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine if two college courses, social problems and psychology, had a liberalizing effect on students' social and political attitudes. A "liberalizing effect" is defined as shifting students' world view and social analysis from an exceptionalistic to an universalistic perspective. The two professors involved in the study intended to liberalize attitudes through their courses by assigning readings which utilize a radical perspective and lecturing primarily from materials with a radical perspective. A questionnaire on political and social attitudes was administered to 103 students in four classes at a medium sized, state-supported, liberal arts university. The questionnaire tapped several dimensions of liberalism/conservatism: status quo/change; acceptance/criticism of societal arrangements; and whether individuals or society are to blame for social problems. Two sections of Social Problems (Sociology 250) and two sections of Human Growth and Development (Psychology 234) were used. Results showed that students are more liberal at the conclusion than at the beginning of the courses. The sociology students showed a greater liberal change than did the students in the psychology courses. The authors point out that we now need to examine whether these liberal values are still held at later times when the student may not be taking any sociology courses. (Author/RM)

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A STUDY OF ATTITUDE CHANGE IN COLLEGE CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we sought to determine if our teaching had a liberalizing effect on our students' social and political attitudes. A questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the semester in one section each of Social Problems and a psychology course, and it was administered at the end of the semester in two sections of Social Problems and the psychology course. Analysis of variance was performed, using posttest scores. The Social Problems course significantly influenced students' attitudes.

Recent statements on teaching, taken together, point out a needed area of research. In identifying various domains of learning, Vaughan (1979) discussed one domain, the affective, which has received little attention in research on teaching. Wiggins, et. al., in assessing a study of academic performance, concluded:

> In sum, however, the results do indicate that most of the information acquired in the course was lost regardless of the various conditions existing in the course. Of course, it cannot be concluded that nothing was maintained by the student. They may have changed their attitudes or may have acquired a different way of thinking (1979:20).

When summing up the state of research on the teaching of sociology, Gelles (1979) stated that the use of a sophisticated experimental design would improve our research on teaching. Combining these ideas, we decided to use an experimental design to examine attitude changes of students in sociology courses.

When we teach, we transmit attitudes as we transmit information. We generally evaluate the amount of information that is absorbed in our classes by using tests. However, we rarely evaluate the degree to which attitudes have been absorbed in our classes or why students might change their attitudes as a result of our classes.

Attitude change of students has been examined in a few studies. The effectiveness of courses in producing change in student attitudes has been documented with respect to attitudes about premarital and marital relationships (Cate, et.al., 1978; Duvall, 1965; Olson and Gravatt, 1968; Walters, 1962), attitudes toward feminism (Baker and Snodgrass, 1979; Brush, et. al., 1978), and political liberalism (Wylie and Parcell, 1979). However, none of these studies used a true experimental design to examine the attitude change process.

The theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that opinion change is a function of a specific complex interaction between the credibility of the communicator and the discrepancy of the communication from the initial attitude of the recipient (Festinger, 1957). Experimental studies have indicated that there is a positive relationship between the credibility of the communicator and the extent of attitude change (Aronson, Turner, and Carlsmith, 1963; Bochner and Insko, 1966; Choo, 1964; Hovland and Weiss, 1952). However, studies examining the discrepancy of the communication from the initial atittude of the recipient have yielded inconsistent results. Several studies determined that attitude change was positively related to the amount of discrepancy (Bochner and Insko, 1966; Choo, 1964; Hovland and Pritzker, 1957; Zimbardo, 1960). On the other hand, other studies have found a curvilinear relationship: attitude change was more likely to occur when the discrepancy was moderate than when the initial attitude of the recipient was widely divergent from the communication (Brewer and Crano, 1968; Hovland Harvey, and Sherif, 1957; Nemeth and Markowski, 1972; Whittaker, 1965).

It has been suggested that attitude change is a phenomenon that occurs almost naturally during college. The experience of college has been found to have a liberalizing effect on students (Chickering, 1970; Finney, 1974; Nosow and Robertson, 1973). Though not all students changed in a liberal direction, seniors generally were more liberal in political, economic, and social values than were freshmen. In a summary of studies on the impact of college, Feldman and Newcomb stated:

> Declining "authoritarianism", dogmatism, and prejudice, together with decreasingly conservative attitudes toward public issues and growing sensitivity to aesthetic experiences, are particularly prominent forms of change--as inferred from freshman-senior differences. (1969:326).

Even as most college students become more liberal, liberalness in political, economic, and social values has not been spread evenly across the college student population. It has generally been found that students who majored in the social sciences tended to be more liberal (Goldstein, 1979; Rich, 1977).

Perhaps this was because faculty in the social sciences were more liberal than other faculty members. A study of college professors by Eitzen and Maranell (1968) yielded the results that behavioral scientists were more liberal than physical scientists or fine artists. Lipset and Ladd (1972) found that sociologists have been the most liberal professors in academe.

It has also been suggested that students in the social sciences, particularly sociology, are the most liberal because of some aspect of the field of study. Rich (1977) found that the number of classes a student takes in which social and political issues predominate was a significant variable in accounting for liberalism. Lipset and Ladd (1972) suggested that sociology would be more attractive to students with left predispositions because it is concerned with topics which remain a focus of discontent. They also suggested that sociology has a liberalizing influence because it has a "debunking" effect on basic assumptions through its production of empirical data which frequently "disprove" the validity of those assumptions.

Conklin (1978) found that an introductory course in sociology seemed to have a slightly liberalizing effect on student opinion. Logan (1976) examined the claim that sociology teaches students to think more critically and scientifically about social issues. He found that, while that was not necessarily true, it was possible to teach students to think more critically, logically, and scientifically in courses having that task as an explicit goal.

In a study which examined the impact of an introductory course in sociology on attitudes, Eitzen and Brouillette (1978) found that taking the introductory course tended to liberalize political and social attitudes. As they noted that this study was done in an environment conducive to political conservativism (Colorado State, 1977), they raised the question of the impact that the course might have at other colleges.

In this study, we sought to determine if our teaching had a liberalizing effect on our students' social and political attitudes. Szmanski and Goertzel's (1979) observations on the frustrations of many young sociology professors fit us well. They pointed out that many students in the 1960's turned to sociology from the antiwar, student, youth, black, and women's movements and sought to use sociology for social change. Those of us who went on to become professional sociologists tend to teach from a radical or conflict perspective, but are generally confronted with students who are less activist, more conservative, more vocational, and more apathetic.

It would certainly be fair to say that we both intend to liberalize attitudes through our sociology courses. We carried out this intention by assigning readings which utilize a radical perspective and lecturing primarily from materials with a radical perspective. However, Eitzen and Brouillette's questions remain: What does happen in our courses? Do our courses liberalize our students? Previous research has documented the liberalizing impact of sociology courses. Our question is whether courses in sociology have a more liberalizing impact than comparable courses in other disciplines.

What we mean by "liberalizing impact" is shifting our students' world view and social analysis from an exceptionalistic to an universalistic perspective. As Ryan (1976) conceptualized the universalistic-exception-

alistic dimension, the exceptionalistic viewpoint defines social problems as residing in persons who are in some manner deficient, delinquent, defective, or dependent. To use Eitzen's (1980) terminology, this perspective blames individuals for social problems. The universalistic perspective we strive to develop in our students emphasizes a structural analysis which locates the causes of social problems in social arrangements. Society is blamed for social problems in that social problems are recurrent, predictable, and preventable. It is the unjust, imperfect, and inequitable nature of social arrangements which engulfs individuals in social problems. Such individuals are victims of society and should not be blamed for or viewed as the cause of the social problems they suffer. To the extent that our sociology courses socialize our students into using a societal-blame or universalistic perspective, we claim to have liberalized our students.

METHOD

A questionnaire on political and social attitudes was administered to 103 students in four classes at a medium-sized, state supported, liberal arts university. The Soloman Four-group Design (Campbell and Stanley, 1963) was used to assess the impact of the Social Problems course on the attitudes of the students. This design allowed for consideration of both internal and external validity factors and for determination of the main effects of the course and pretesting and the interaction of pretesting and the course. Two sections of Social Problems (Sociology 250) and two sections of Human Growth and Development (Psychology 234) were used. The questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the fall, 1980, semester in one section each of Social Problems and Human Growth and Development, and it was administered at the end of the semester in all four classes.

The questionnaire we used was developed by Eitzen and Brouillette (1978) to measure the impact of the sociology courses on political attitudes. It consists of 18 forced-choice, paired statements, with one response in each pair being conservative and the other being liberal. The questionnaire taps several dimensions of liberalism/conservatism: status quo/change; acceptance/criticism of societal arrangements; and whether individuals or society is to blame for social problems. We scored the questionnaire in such a way that each respondent was assigned a liberalism score with possible values ranging from 0 to 18, with higher scores being more liberal.

RESULTS

Sixty of the students were from the Social Problems classes, with 29 having both the pretest and the posttest and 31 having the posttest only. Forty-three of the students were from the Human Growth and Development classes, with 23 having both the pretest and the posttest and 20 having the posttest only. Twenty-five percent of the students were male and 75 percent were female. The average age was 19.6, with almost all of the students in the 18 to 21 age range. Seventeen percent of the students were first-year students, 42% were sophomores, 30% were juniors, and 11% were seniors. Twenty-two percent of the students were social science majors, 42% were education majors, 12% were arts and humanities majors, 11% were business majors, and the rest had not yet declared a major. Thirty-nine percent of the students had completely no sociology courses in colleges, 41% had completed one, 13% had completed two, and 7% had completed three or more. The pretest scores ranged from 3 to 16, with a mean of 10, a median of 11, and a mode of 13. The posttest scores ranged from 2 to 18, with a mean of 12, a median of 13, and a mode of 14.

A t-test was done to assess the comparability of the two classes that completed the pretest. The Social Problems class had a pretest mean of 10.9 and the Human Growth and Development class had a pretest mean of 9.8, indicating that there were not significant differences in the political attitude scores of the two classes at the beginning of the semester ($t=1.41$, $df=50$, n.s.).

The mean posttest scores for the Social Problems classes were 14.5 and 13.2 for the pretested and the posttest-only classes, respectively. For Human Growth and Development, the mean posttest scores were 9.2 for the pretested class and 11.0 for the posttest-only class.

A simple 2x2 analysis of variance was performed, using posttest scores. The Social Problems course main effect was significant ($F=33.327$, $df=1,99$, $p<.001$) and the main effect of pretesting was not significant. The Social Problems course significantly influenced students' attitudes. The interaction effects between course and pretest were significant ($F=5.851$, $df=1,99$, $p<.05$). The pretsted Human Growth and Development class had a lower posttest score than the posttest-only class, while the pretested Social Problems class had a higher score than the posttest-only class. Since the Social Problems course dealt with issues mentioned on the questionnaire, perhaps the pretest sensitized students to those issues.

DISCUSSION

In this study we have established that sociology courses can have a liberalizing impact. Through our teaching, we have attempted to achieve some change in the affective domain, as described by Vaughan (1979). The highest level of the affective domain is that of internalizing values and integrating values into a total world view. While this study has demonstrated that our students are significantly more liberal at the conclusion

than at the beginning of our courses and that our sociology students show a greater liberal change than did the students in a psychology course, we have not demonstrated any long-term change or internalization of these values. In the same sense that we educators have been concerned with student retention of course materials beyond the final exam, we should be concerned with affective retention.

Eitzen has asserted that "accepting the system-blame perspective is a necessary first step to efforts to try and restructure society along more human lines" (1980:15). If we are to be successful at debunking victim-blaming ideology, then we must take the affective component of pedagogy seriously. As instructors, we can and should monitor our progress and effectiveness in achieving the attitudinal objectives of our courses. As Quinney has so aptly observed,

> And we have a choice: whether to aid in further legitimizing the capitalist system (operating as the petty bourgeoisie), or to engage in the class struggle for socialism. We are cultural workers, and the politics we choose and the class consciousness we develop make all the difference (1980:179).

Our commitment to social justice and social change dictates that we earnestly strive to "liberalize" our students.

The social psychology literature suggests that credibility of the communicator and discrepancy between initial and conveyed attitudes are important in attitude change. These could be examined to shed some light on the process of affective change in classes.

We need to examine the duration of the affective change. We have shown that change occurs over a semester and that students hold more liberal values at the conclusion of the course. However, we nned to examine whether these liberal values are still held at later times when the students may not be taking any sociology courses. In order to achieve some change in the affective domain, we want these values to be truly internalized.

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